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MEDIA REVIEW



EYEING MEDIA FOR ITS REAL ESTATE

News of Haste

■ BY C S H N MURTHY

There is something seriously wrong with our news channels – is the usual refrain among youth, educated, elite and intellectual class. Each has its own ideas as to how to correct it. But, all such ideas put together and properly articulated offer a lot of insight into the working of the channels. If one looks beyond what 'the eyes can meet', the confusion is not just about the news channels not being 'news centric'. There is something more to it. Something is 'eccentric' and 'idiosyncratic'.

On December 4, 2006, Rajdeep Sardesai, head of CNN-IBN, after initial resistance withdrew his petition against the ruling of the UP assembly speaker in the Supreme Court, and appeared before the UP assembly on December 4, and even admitted that the manner in which sting operations were conducted against MLAs/MLCs had certainly fallen out of Media Ethics.

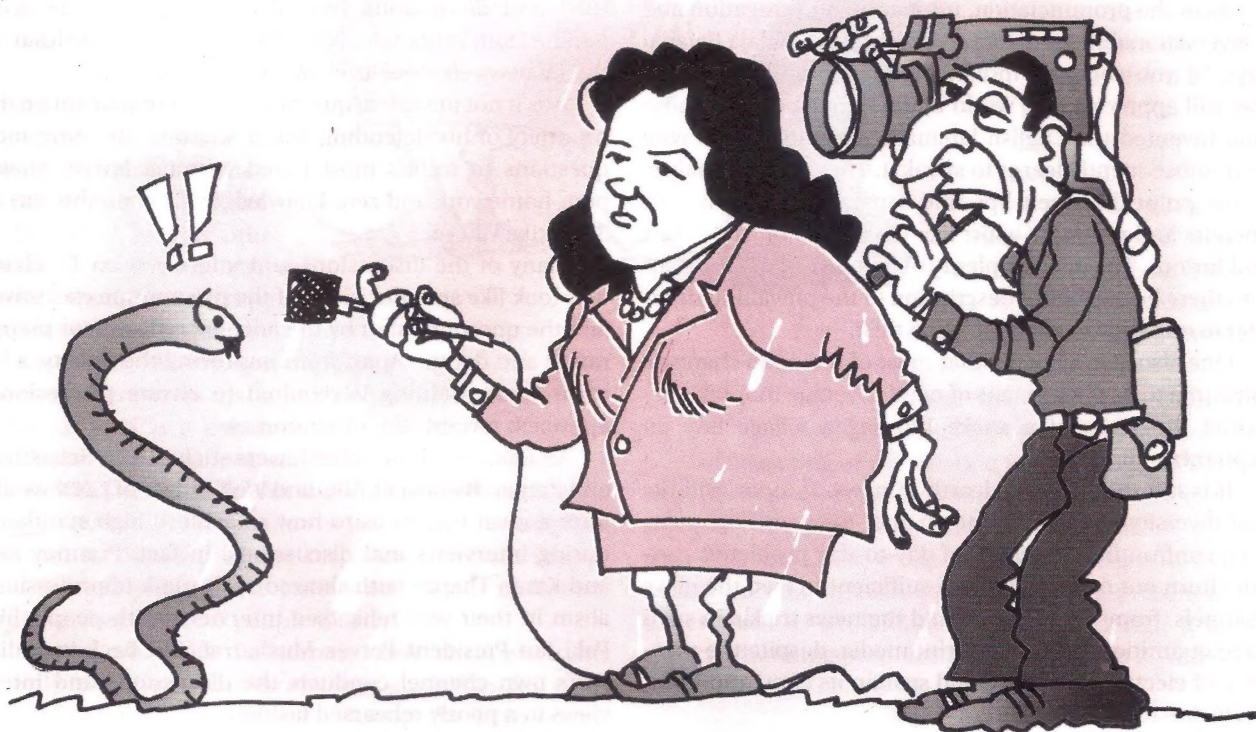
If one recalls here, Ch Ramoji Rao, Chief Editor of

Eenadu group precisely refused to do same before the AP State Legislative Council in mid 1980s. It looked as though Mr Sardesai for a while preferred a negotiated settlement to a protracted litigation. But at what cost is unclear.

Ramoji Rao had a narrow escape recently. The Supreme Court on December 5 ordered the ETV 2 to express regrets openly through a statement for what it aired against the Chief Minister Dr Y S Rajasekhara Reddy and his cabinet on November 25, 2005, and repeat it as many times as possible.

Clearly a number of issues were involved if one were to analyse the developments occurring across the small screen. News channel patterns of regular telecasts, repeat telecasts, discussions, interviews, episodic stories consisting of investigative reports — all point out to a number of inbuilt grey areas in the process of making 'news' and 'telecasting' it.

Though these are general formats followed by most of the news TV channels in their pattern of transmission



across the globe, most Indian channels use this format as 'time fillers' to the news coverage otherwise required.

The grey areas range from the composition of headlines, the duration of visuals, diction, kind of language used, kinds of stories picked up, poor quality of coverage compared to newspapers, poor regional coverage to balance the news reporting as deserved by the newspapers in regular editions, crisis of news (in spite of having an excellent array of print media which runs plenty of stories bearing a lot of relevance to socio-economic issues), poor discussions and interviews lacking in purpose and relevance with anchors talking more than the invitees, media trial and proactive role, etc.

Lets analyse the format adapted by channels like Aaj Tak and Headlines Today and NDTV (both Hindi and English) with regard to showing 'headlines' every half-an-hour. May be this is an imported idea from channels like BBC, CNN etc. But, it is doubtful whether these channels have ever made a scientific study on one, the composition in terms of crisp language, and two, visual exposure in terms of time (even in seconds).

The crispness and the native idiom of either British or American English in the composition of sentences of headlines and the visual exposure time the technical teams give contrast quite sharply with that of Indian channels. Somewhere it calls for deeper communication and professional composition skills as part of training either at TV channel (in-house training) or in the schools of journalism and mass communication.

As to the pronunciation, intonation, interrogation and conversational skills, media commentator Shailaja Bajapai says, "if you compare Indian TV news channels to BBC, you will appreciate the world of difference between those who invented the English language and those of us who have subsequently learnt to speak it. They are minimalists to the point that their lips find separation difficult. Our anchors and reporters whirr like fans on a hot day — fast and furious. The result is plenty of high speed mish-mash" Can there be any better description of the prevailing situation in our English channels than this?

One also gets a feeling that most of the news channels appeared to be facing crisis of news coverage (Aaj Tak telecasted the news of a snake hunting a village boy on September 16, 2006).

It is not that there is dearth of news. If India, with its vast diversity and nearly one-sixth of the world's population, confronting a number of day-to-day problems, cannot churn out news more than sufficient to feed the news channels, from where else would the news trickle in such large quantities. In fact the print media, despite the presence of electronic media could sustain its circulation precisely due to its extensive coverage.

In spite of having thousands of stories — political, economic, criminal, sexual, legal, developmental, cor-

ruption and apathy of the government — being covered in the print media, the electronic media could not get hold of them and give adequate coverage to issues that bear relevance to a common man.

One reason could be that correcting the regional imbalance of the news coverage involves a lot of manpower recruitment and infrastructure for hooking it up through satellite to the studio. But what about transmitting pre-recorded footages?

Even performance of regional channels like ETV 2, Teja, Maa, Jaya, Raj, TV 9 and Sun are no better. Most of the regional news channels suffer from the same crisis of news, lack of balance in the regional coverage within the state and indulging in excessive political coverage.

Of late, channels like NDTV ('I Witness') and CNN-IBN ('Citizen journalist'), and TV 9 ('you can also become a reporter') have resorted to a new technique to offset this coverage problem by extending invitation to all the viewers to send in footage to be telecast. This may be described as truly 'democratic journalism' but it falls short of the 'gate-keeping' it requires. It lacks in 'authenticity' and ultimately drives the channel into a plethora of legal problems.

As for the interviews and discussions on channels like NDTV, Aaj Tak, Times Now, one finds an unprofessional and amateurish way of handling issues.

Purpose and relevance of some of the interviews (with Ms Sonia Gandhi and Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav on November 10, 2006; Ram Jeetmalani by Saagarika Ghose on CNN-IBN) and discussions (We, The People in NDTV with Barkha Dutt; Verdict in CNN-IBN with Rajdeep Sardesai) at the TV news channel level are not known.

Was it not unwise to question Ram Jeetmalani on the propriety of his defending Manu Sharma? Shooting such questions to India's most noted criminal lawyer shows poor homework and zero knowledge of law on the part of Saagarika Ghose.

Many of the discussions and interviews on TV channels look like spot decisions of the programme executives and the questions shot by the anchors reflect poor preparation and depth. Apart from improving the quality, a lot of in-house training is required to ensure professional approach towards the programmes.

An analysis of top interviewers such as Tim Sebastian, and Zainad Badawi of BBC and Wolf Blitzer of CNN would offer a great insight as to how to achieve high standards during interviews and discussions. In fact, Prannoy Roy and Karan Thapar both showed such spark of professionalism in their well-rehearsed interviews with people like Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. But back in India, Roy's own channel conducts the discussions and interviews in a poorly rehearsed fashion.

When it comes to the poor showing of TV channels in their selection of stories, people can hardly forget the kind

of media attention given to Pramod Mahajan's health preceding his death in the hospital and, afterwards, to his son Rahul Mahajan. Issues like Mika Singh kissing Rakhi Sawant, wardrobe malfunctions in fashion shows become sensational news and they are covered for hours together. They certainly had commercial overtones.

On analysing media activism, as displayed by news channels, one discovers that the media offer different treatments to different offenders of law. For instance, Karan Thapar's glorification of Sanjay Dutt as a great personality goes hand-in-hand with its proactive role in portraying Manu Sharma as a 'criminal' in Jessica Lal's murder.

Similarly media's backing of former cricketer and MP Navjot Singh Sidhu as a great individual despite his scary record does not get on well with its (media's) role in Priyadarshini Mattoo's case. In each case when media held some one as 'criminal', it had equally hailed another. How can media justify its paradoxical behaviour?

Another message media is sending out is that media would fight for models/law students but not for someone like Ashiana. Further, most of the cases media fought are Delhi-based, leaving other states to their own fate, as though there were no rape and murder cases elsewhere.

One can clearly see media's market interests in its selective portrayal of who is a criminal and who is a good one. When *Outlook* editor Vinod Mehta asked Ms Barkha Dutt's in a recent show 'whether she would be zealous about a case (similar to Jessica or Priyadarshini Mattoo) in Gorakhpur', she responded without hesitation "Probably not. These cases work for our audiences because they work for people like us".

Part of what ails the current news channels stems directly from the ownership ideology, guidelines and commercial interests which in turn influence the 'news policy' of other ownerships that do not have sister entertainment channels. For instance, today entertainment channels like

ETV network, Sun TV network, Maa TV (in regional languages) and Sahara have set up separate news channels like ETV 2, Teja TV, Sahara – which transmit news 24x7, in addition to telecasting news on their original entertainment channels (Gemini, ETV, Teja etc.).

One finds the 'news policy' decisions of these channels are clearly influenced by the news channels run by the entertainment channels (NDTV's tie up with Karan Johar's Dharma Productions and Aamir Khan's productions).

As a result, the 'news policy' decisions, conception and execution of programmes have been skewed due to the competition they bring about on others.

Our News TV channels are also credited with showing gory scenes, mutilated bodies, brutal assassinations, mangled bogies of trains after accidents, burnt houses, etc. in repeat telecasts as to force the evidence to stop eating while watching TV.

There is a lot for our news channels to learn from BBC or CNN with regard to the limited provision for commercials/advertisements during the transmission of news, including their own advertisements.

BBC or CNN have never interrupted a news telecast and gone for a break. This is observed with all the more care when some breaking news is being reported.

Against the backdrop what one would intensely hope for is a thorough overhauling of the existing functioning of TV channels, its manpower besides refreshing them with modern skills of communication and professionalism on par with BBC and CNN. It required a lot of scientific examination on part of each channel and the presence of a select team of professionals who can design a broad capacity building programme in addition to laying down appropriate guidelines. ■

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